

Message Text

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ACTION AF-06

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SUBJ: RENEW THE RENOVATION BUT KEEP THE FRENCH

REF: A. LIBREVILLE 0433, B. LIBREVILLE 0525, C. LIBREVILLE 0530

SUMMARY: PRESIDENT BONGO AND FONMIN OKUMBA WENT ON TV APRIL 3 TO CALM FRENCH COMMUNITY THAT HAD GROWN INCREASINGLY NERVOUS ABOUT THEIR PERSONAL SAFETY AND SECURITY OF THEIR INVESTMENTS IN GABON.

1. IN SERIES OF SPEECHES AND NEWS CONFERENCES BEGINNING WITH NEW YEAR'S ADDRESS AND BUILDING TO CLIMAX AT MARCH 11 RENOVATION DAY SPEECH (REFTEL B), BONGO HAD PLACED FOREIGNERS UNDER SHARP ATTACK FOR PROFITEERING BUSINESS PRACTICES AND INSULTING TREATMENT OF GABONESE. FRENCH CLEARLY HAVE FELT MOST THREATENED BY ATTACKS SINCE THEY PREDOMINATE AMONG LARGE AND RAPIDLY GROWING EUROPEAN EXPATRIATE COMMUNITY AS WELL AS CONTROL MAJORITY OF GABON'S MAJOR BUSINESSES AND INDUSTRIES.

2. SINCE MARCH 11 THERE HAS BEEN RASH OF MINOR AND
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ONE OR TWO MAJOR CONFRONTATIONS BETWEEN FRENCH AND

GABONESE THAT PERHAPS COULD BE ATTRIBUTED TO BONGO'S PROVOCATIVE STATEMENTS. AT LEAST, THIS IS INTERPRETATION THAT FRENCH COMMUNITY HAS GIVEN EVENTS AND THEIR RESULTING NERVOUSNESS AND MALAISE HAS BEEN STRONGLY FELT IN OFFICIAL AND UNOFFICIAL QUARTERS IN LIBREVILLE.

3. THEIR AGITATION APPARENTLY PRECIPITATED THE PRESIDENT'S NEXT MOVE IN A TV INTERVIEW APRIL 3 IN WHICH BONGO INTERPRETED HIS MARCH 11 RENOVATION DAY REMARKS. POINT OF CAREFULLY ORCHESTRATED INTERVIEW WAS THAT BONGO NEVER INTENDED TO IMPLY THAT HE WOULD RUN OUT FRENCH OR EXPROPRIATE THEIR BUSINESSES AND PROPERTY. IF SOME FRENCH HAD BECOME NERVOUS AFTER HIS ATTACKS ON "NEO-COLONIALIST ATTITUDES" AND ON ABUSES OF "UNTAMED CAPITALISM", THEN THEY WERE THE ONES WITH GUILTY CONSCIENCES. ALL HE AND GABONESE WERE ASKING WAS THAT FOREIGNERS REMEMBER THEIR STATUS AND RESPECT LAWS AND PEOPLE OF GABON. UNDER THESE CIRCUMSTANCES, THEIR SKILLS AND CAPITAL WOULD ALWAYS BE WELCOME.

4. BONGO MENTIONED IN INTERVIEW THAT OTHER MINISTERS WOULD HAVE MORE TO SAY ON SAME SUBJECT AND IN FACT IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING PRESIDENT MINISTER OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS OKUMBA APPEARED TO READ STATMENT CONFIRMING GOG'S NEW CONCILIATORY ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE FRENCH. ALTHOUGH OKUMBA TOOK CONDESCENDING APPROACH BY SUGGESTING THAT FRENCH WERE NERVOUS BECAUSE THEY NEVER REALLY LISTEN TO OR TRY TO UNDERSTAND PRESIDENT BONGO, HE RE-EMPHASIZED GOVERNMENT'S COMMITMENT TO THEIR PERSONAL SAFETY AND SECURITY OF THEIR PROPERTY.

5. COMMENT: REVERSE OF POSITION IS NOT SURPRISING FROM BONGO WHO IS QUINTESSENTIAL PRAGMATIST. REACTION BY BOTH GABONESE AND FRENCH TO HIS ATTACKS ON FOREIGNERS PROBABLY HAS BEEN GREATER THAN EXPECTED AND IT WAS THEN HIS TURN TO BECOME NERVOUS OVER WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IF FRANCO-GABONESE RELATIONS REALLY TURN SOUR. THIS IS CRITICAL TIME FOR BONGO'S DEVELOPMENT PLANS WHICH DEPEND ESSENTIALLY ON POSITIVE ATTITUDE BY FRENCH AND OTHER CAPITALIST COUNTRIES TOWARD HIS GOVERNMENT. IF THEY BACK OFF BECAUSE OF RASH OF ZENOPHOBIA, GOG AND BONGO WOULD BE LEFT BADLY OVER-EXTENDED.

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6. ONE FINAL COMMENT MAY BE WORTH RECORDING. EMBASSY NEVER INTERPRETED BONGO'S REMARKS AND CERTAINLY NOT HIS CONCRETE ACTIONS AS ANY REASON FOR CONCERN FOR FOREIGN INVESTORS OR EXPATRIATE TECHNICIANS. FACT THAT FRENCH DID BECOME HIGHLY NERVOUS AND SOME GABONESE DID TAKE ADVANTAGE OF WHAT THEY SAW AS OPPORTUNITY FOR REVENGE ONLY DEMONSTRATES FUNDAMENTAL INSTABILITY AND

FRICITION OF FRANCO-GABONESE HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS.
DEJARNETTE

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